DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 545 CS 215 552

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TITLE Getting Along without Grades--And Getting Along with Them Too.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; Feedback; *Grading; Higher Education; Informal Assessment; *Student Evaluation; Teacher Student Relationship; Writing (Composition); *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Grids; *Learning Environment

ABSTRACT

Conventional grading is so ubiquitous that it is tempting to see it as inevitable and to feel hopeless about making any changes. It is often not reliable nor does it have clear meaning. Also, it does not give students feedback about what they did well or badly. Even while operating under a conventional grading system, composition teachers can use some temporary time-outs from grading such as 10 days of freewriting, journal writing, or ungraded writing assignments, or by making contracts for grades which say if the student does x, y, and z, he/she can count on a certain grade. Stepping outside of grading helps learning and makes teaching more satisfying. Operating outside the mentality of evaluation or judging of student writing can foster an atmosphere of support and appreciation that helps students flourish, think well, and stretch themselves. Instead of evaluating quality, ask instead what the paper says or implies and what the writer assumes--answer these questions about students' writing and train students to answer them about each other's writing. Grades will be more fair if the criteria for evaluation is spelled out for students and if they are given valuable feedback. (Included are 2 grading grid examples.) (CR)

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GETTING ALONG WITHOUT GRADES--AND GETTING ALONG WITH THEM TOO

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Peter Elbow

ED 401 545

This paper is driven by the utopian impulse and also the impulse to tinker. On the one hand, I will insist on the possibility of large change: grading is neither natural nor inevitable; we can avoid grading; we can even step outside the mentality of evaluation. Yet on the other hand, I will insist on the importance of small, pragmatic changes--what some might call tinkering. Indeed, most of what I suggest here can be used within a conventional grading system. After all, most of us are obliged to do our evaluating within such systems for now, and the human tendency to evaluate is inevitable. The utopian and the pragmatic impulses may seem at odds, but the common element is an insistence that things can be better--change is possible.

The essay is in three sections:

1. ways we can step outside of grading;
2. ways we can step outside of the very mentality of judging or evaluation;
3. ways we can use grades better.

1. Ways to Step Outside of Grading

If I am suggesting ways to step outside of grading I suppose I better give my reasons for wanting to do so. I can do so quickly. Grading seems to me a problem because:

- --Grades aren't trustworthy or reliable.
- --They don't have clear meaning.
- --They don't give students feedback about what they did well or badly.
- --They undermine the teaching-and-learning situation:
  - --by leading many students to work more for the sake of the grade than for learning;
  - --by leading to an adversarial relationship between students and teachers (since some students quarrel with our grades and many feel resentful at the grades they get);
  - --by leading to a competitive atmosphere.
- --Figuring out grades is difficult and anxious-making work for us.

Conventional grading is so ubiquitous that it's tempting to see it as inevitable and to feel hopeless about making any changes. But it's important to realize that grading is not built into the universe; it's not like gravity--not "natural" or inevitable. If that sounds utopian, I can point to The Evergreen State College. I taught there for nine years. Since it started in 1971, teachers have given narrative evaluations instead of grades. The system works fine on all counts--including success in placing students in professional and graduate schools. Where Evergreen is a non-elite state college in Washington, Hampshire College is an elite private institution here in Amherst Massachusetts that also has a solid history of success with no grades. We mustn't forget that educational institutions can get along just fine without grades.

But discussion of Evergreen and Hampshire tends to trap us into either/or

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thinking: whether or not to have grading at all; whether or not to transform the entire curriculum as they've done at Evergreen or Hampshire. So I want to wrest the discussion out of this binary rut and talk about how we can find temporary time-outs from grading, even while operating under a conventional grading system. Instead of asking, "Grading--yes or no?" let's ask, "Grading--how much?"

And let's jump from the largest to the smallest scale: freewriting. To freewrite for ten minutes is to step outside of grading for ten minutes. Some people complain about teachers using freewriting in mechanical or thoughtless or random ways: just ten minutes now and then for no good reason--not integrated with the rest of the curriculum. Yes, it's sad if teachers call it freewriting but collect it and read it; I don't think it's really freewriting unless it's private. But still, every time teachers get students to do genuinely nongraded writing, they are inviting students to notice that the link between writing and grading can be broken--that it is possible to write and not worry about how the teacher will evaluate it--that it is possible to write in pursuit of one's own goals and standards and not just someone else's. When teachers assign journal writing and don't grade it, this too is an important time-out from grading.

Freewriting is just ten minutes. A small time-out. But what if we freewrite for ten days? Or what if we have ten days of nongraded writing assignments? We can do that and still work within a grading system. Many teachers do it at the start of a semester: an orgy of nongraded writing. Two weeks of required but nongraded writing has a deep effect on students' and teachers' relationship to writing, and has big effects on fluency, risk taking, and voice.

Portfolios. Portfolios are a way to refrain from putting grades on individual papers: for a while we can just write comments and students can revise. Grading can wait till we have more pieces of writing in hand--more data to judge.

Contracts for a grade. For the last few years, this has been my favorite way to work within a regular grading system. Contracts provide a way to avoid grading--avoid trying to measure the quality of work or learning--yet still arrive at a conventional course grade for students. A contract says, "If you do x, y, and z, you can count on such and such a grade." For me, the pedagogical principle in using contracts is this: "I don't trust my efforts to measure learning, and I hate pretending to do so. I'd rather put my efforts into something I do trust and do enjoy: trying to specify activities and behaviors that will lead to learning."

I have most often used what might be called a messy or impure contract--a contract that spells out what is required for a course grade of B, and then goes on to say, in effect, "If you want an A, most of your assignments must be ones that I have called explicitly 'excellent' in my comment to you." That is, for the grade of A, I have fallen back on the process of trying to measure quality. This kind of contract has served as a way to be circumspect in moving away from grading. But recently I've been experimenting with a full contract system where I have requirements for a B and additional requirements for an A. These additional requirements are my experiments in trying to specify activities that I think will lead to excellent work and learning. (See the appendix for my current contract for a first year writing course--but be aware that I keep making small and sometimes large changes.)

A contract can be a way to minimize evaluation itself--and I often try to do just that. But what needs emphasizing is how contracts can enhance evaluation--can make evaluation healthier and more productive by untangling it from grading. That is, I find that a contract allows me to be more evaluative than I could be with conventional grading of papers. The contract allows me to make blunter criticisms or pushier suggestions because students know that my responses have nothing to do with the grade. Students needn't go along with what I say in order to get a good grade. (Note however that I have set up the contract so that they cannot refrain from making significant revisions. But I emphasize that they can make changes entirely different from what I might have suggested or implied--and that they don't have to make their revisions necessarily better--just substantively different.)

Thus I think that a contract helps me put students into the ideal learning situation: they have to listen to my criticism and advice, yet they get to make up their own mind about whether to go along. Their decision will have no effect on their grade. This means they have to <u>think</u> about my response on its own terms--listen to me as reader and human being--instead of just reacting to me in the patterned and habitual ways with which students often react to teachers. (Of course students occasionally tell me that they <u>feel</u> pressure to go along with my comments--even though they can see that it really won't help their grade. This provides fruitful occasions for students to explore how they usually feel and react to teacher comments and grades.)

In the end I think my contract gets students to listen to me better. When I use conventional grades, students tend to do what I suggest only for the sake of the grade--and don't really listen to me, don't really wrestle in their mind with whether what I say makes sense. Grading too often tricks students into a thoughtless way of reacting to comments from teachers: "What my teacher wants me to do is stupid, but I'll do it anyway for the grade." This is an understandable defensive tactic for maintaining one's autonomy (an instance of "underlife"--see Brooke), but it doesn't make for good thinking or learning.

Finally, let me look at contracts in relation to what is perhaps the final and most nitty-gritty defense of grading: "If I give up grades, the students just won't <u>work</u>." But notice how indirect a system this is, and how tenuous the causal link between grading and student effort. We try to give fair grades to student papers and we hope that our behavior will make them work hard at the kind of behavior that leads to good writing and good learning. But some students just don't work much, despite our grading--either because they don't care or because they have given up or because they can get good grades without trying; other students work only to psych out the teacher rather than really to learn; while a few even cheat or plagiarize. I find it a relief to resort to a contract in order to be more <u>direct</u> in my attempts to make students work. With a contract I can simply, as it were, <u>make</u> them do the work that I think will lead to good writing and learning. They have to do the work, but they don't have to "please me." I'd rather put my effort into trying to figure out which actual activities or behaviors I want from them rather trying to figure out the exact degree of quality of the writing they turn in and hope that my grades will lead them to the right activities.

In section one I've tried to make these points: Stepping outside of grading helps learning and makes teaching more satisfying. Whole institutions can successfully dispense with grading altogether. With a contract, we can

step outside of grading for an entire course. And there are numerous smaller time-outs from grading that we can use alongside of grading, such as freewriting and other nongraded activities.

2. Ways to Step Outside of the Mentality of Evaluation

I want to up the ante now. If we just step outside of grading, we don't necessarily step outside of the mentality of evaluation or judging. After all we can read an ungraded assignment and say, "I'm sure glad I'm not grading this piece of writing because it is terrible."

But is it possible to stop judging--to stop seeing writing in terms of quality? It is possible--and in fact not so unusual. That is, even though it is inevitable that humans often see in terms of judgment or quality, they sometimes don't.

The most obvious example is when we like or love. Sometimes we like or dislike a person, an object, a work of art--and more to the point here, a piece of writing--regardless of our judgment of its quality. It doesn't feel so odd to like a piece of writing even though we know it is not good; or dislike it and yet feel clear that it is good. We often love someone or something because we "value" them, not because we "evaluate" them as good. The loving or "valuing" is something we do or give or add; we don't necessarily base it on our judgment of the "value" or "quality" of the person or object.

I'm not saying that we always take off the judging lens when we like or love. Sometimes we do base our liking or loving on our evaluation of quality. ("It's so great I love it.") I'm simply insisting that liking or loving are not always based on evaluation; that liking and evaluating can be independent of each other. When I began to realize this, I found myself liking more often--students and students' writing--without wearing my judging hat. (We can get better at liking students and their writing; it's a skill. I suggest ways in my "Ranking, Judging, and Liking.") My main claim here, then, is limited, but important: I'm insisting on the empirical observation that it is not unusual for us to spend some time outside the evaluative mentality.

I find it a relief to operate for important periods of time outside this evaluative mentality. It seems to me that these time-outs help my teaching. I think they foster an atmosphere of support and appreciation that helps people flourish, think well, and stretch themselves.

Admittedly there is a different and more obvious kind of stretching that comes from the opposite atmosphere of judging, evaluating, and criticizing. Many people testify with appreciation to how a tough teacher's evaluative criticism made them stretch. But this stretching-under-pressure does not negate another perhaps more delicate kind of stretching that can come when we reduce the pressure of judgment and evaluation. Sometimes people don't take risks or try out their own values or start to use their own internal motivation until critical thinking is turned off and even nonsense and garbage are welcomed. In such a setting people sometimes think themselves into their best thinking or imagine themselves into being more of who they could be. Non-evaluative support and acceptance is not rare in the family--especially towards infants and young children. But in school and college settings the evaluative mentality is pervasive. Of course the banishing of evaluation does not always lead to this stretching--but then neither does an emphasis on evaluation always lead to that other kind of stretching.

This talk of liking and loving tends to sound soft, fuzzy, and

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unintellectual and I have the impulse to be defensive about it. But I block that impulse because it's time to insist clearly that there's nothing wrong with time-out zones from what is critical, hard, cool and detached--not just in elementary school but in higher education. We need it, even for good thinking.

But it is important nevertheless to break out of this association between non-evaluation and unintellectual fuzziness. That is, we can have time-outs from the evaluative mentality and still operate in a conventionally intellectual, cognitive, academic school spirit. We can do so through the use of certain questions about texts--especially about student writing.

The questions we most often ask of student writing are quality questions: "How good or bad is it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? How can it be made better?" But there are numerous simple, obvious, and important questions we can ask that completely side-step quality or value:

> What does the paper say? Imply? What is the writer's point of view or stance? What does the writer assume? How does the paper ask me to see the world? What would I do if I believed it?

If I answer these questions, I am not saying anything about the paper being good or bad, strong or weak. These questions are all requests to summarize or extend the paper. A careful summary of a bad paper need not reveal anything of its quality. (There is one kind of badness does seem to show up in a summary: emptiness. If a paper simply doesn't say much at all, a careful summary will contain damningly little. But even this kind of badness will not show up when we answer the other questions: "What does the paper imply, what does the writer assume?")

So if we answer these questions about our students' writing--and train our students to answer them about each others' writing--we can operate outside the mentality of evaluation or judgment or quality. We will be doing something perfectly intellectual, academic, cognitive, hard, and detached--we will not be giving in to the dreaded disease of "softness"--yet we will still be stepping outside of the mentality of judgment. Of course, as with loving and liking, I'm not saying that these questions <u>force</u> us out of the mentality of evaluation. We often summarize in an evaluative or even hostile way. But as with loving or liking, these questions <u>invite</u> us--if we are willing--to take off the lens of judging for a while. We discover it is possible to have long discussions of the meaning and implications of a paper and find we have wholly forgotten about the question of quality.

The same goes for other interesting questions we can ask of any text:

> How does the paper relate to other events or values in the culture? How does it relate to what other students are writing--or other texts around us? How does this text relate to other things the student has written?

There are some other questions of this sort that we can't answer them without the writer's help:

> How does the paper relate to events in the writer's life? Why did the writer write these words?

Yet these questions are no less intellectual or analytic or interesting just because the writer must help us answer them. We often ask published writers to answer these questions. Why not ask our students too?

Finally I would call attention to how the most bluntly simple, obvious, and frequently asked question about a text is, in fact, also entirely

irrelevant to quality:

> As reader, what are my thoughts on the topic? Where do I agree or disagree?

For even if I disagree completely with everything the paper says, it does not follow that I consider the paper bad. We often disagree with excellent writing. And we agree with terrible writing. In short, if I simply engage the issue of the paper and tell my thoughts, I am not in the same realm as talking about the quality of the paper.

Many students have never had a teacher take their message seriously enough to engage with it by saying, "Here are my thoughts about your issue." When teachers talk about how good or bad a paper is or talk about its strengths and weaknesses or make suggestions for improvement, their responses often function as a way to avoid engagement with the topic or the writer.

We can take a lesson here from literary studies. Most of the questions we put to works of literature have nothing to do with quality. We seldom ask of something by Shakespeare or Adrienne Rich or even minor writers, "How good or bad is it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? How can we make it better?" Some people do, of course--thus the canon debates. But these arguments are soon tiresome and not of much use. Much more useful than debates about quality are questions like these:

> What does this text say or do? Why is this author interesting to read? What does this text have to say to us? How does it relate to what other authors are saying or what is going on in the culture or in us? Who does it speak to? How is it put together or how does it say and do what it says and does?

In literary and cultural studies we often forcibly put aside questions of quality and ask questions like these even about works we agree are poor quality (such as second rate comic books or hackneyed advertisements).

None of these truly analytic, academic questions are evaluative, yet they are much more intellectually interesting than questions about quality. In the end, then, I conclude that the least interesting questions we can ask of any text--by students or published authors--are questions of quality or evaluation. The most intellectually interesting work we can do invites us (though it does not require us) to step outside the mentality of evaluation.

It is the preoccupation with evaluation and quality that leads students, their parents, and legislators to see writing as merely or inherently an occasion for being judged. We know all too well that students often feel that it doesn't make sense to write unless the writing is evaluated with a grade.

In section two I've tried to make these points: It is inevitable and natural for humans to judge or evaluate. In a school or college setting it seems almost impossible to step outside of this evaluative mentality--but really it is an easy, common human act. We often do it at an affective level when we like or love--dislike or hate. But we also frequently step outside of the evaluative mentality--or at least are invited to do so--when we ask and answer many of our most common intellectual and analytic questions about texts.

3. Ways to Use Grades Better

Let me turn now to conventional grading itself. I would ask you to visualize conventional grades as pure verticality--literally one dimensional. There is no element of the horizontal. Regular A through F grades consist of

nothing but a vertical stack of levels, with each one defined in no other way than "better than the one below, worse than the one above." Grades are simply numbers and of course numbers are defined in exactly these terms--"greater than n-1, lesser than n+1." No one knows what "B" means other than, "worse than A and better than C." Conventional grades demarcate eleven levels of "pure quality"--quality that is wholly undefined and unarticulated.

This pure, numerical, one dimensional verticality--no words or concepts attached--is the main reason why conventional grades are untrustworthy descriptors for complex human performances, and why they lead to such difficulty and dispute. How, for example, can we define or specify which essays should get an A and which ones an A- when we have no words or concepts or criteria? "For an A, your paper can't be just really good, it must be really really good." (We see even steeper verticality when faculty members grade essays on a scale of 1 to 100--as they do in many law schools.)

In response to this unrelenting verticality, I will make two suggestions: (a) reduce the verticality somewhat by using minimal grades; (b) add a bit of a horizontal dimension by using criteria as we grade.

(a) Minimal grading will reduce the verticality of conventional grades by giving us fewer levels. Most of us use minimal grades when we make low stakes assignments and grade them pass/fail or ok/strong/weak or check/check-plus/check-minus. But we tend to assume that if an assignment is important and we want students to take it more seriously and work harder on it, we should use conventional grades with eleven levels of quality.

But we should question this assumption. It rests on a failure to distinguish between stakes and levels. That is, when students take an assignment more seriously and work harder, it has little to do with the fact that we have added more quality levels in our grading; it has much more to do with the fact that we have raised the stakes and made the assignment count for more of the final grade. Not many students will struggle really hard to get that A if it doesn't much matter in the final grade. (Admittedly, a few students will struggle in this situation--out of love of learning or compulsion.) The only reliable way to use grades to make students work harder is by raising the stakes--as long as we make it hard enough to get a Pass in a two-level situation. And we need only increase the number of levels to three or four to get those students working hard who want a chance distinguish their work as superior.

But there is something that raising the number of grading levels will reliably achieve: it will make us work much harder. Think of the difference between reading a stack of papers in order to give them conventional grades, versus reading them only to pick out those that are notably weak or notably strong.

What I am proposing, then, is that we will have a much better time grading if we realize that stakes and levels are different and separable variables. Every act of grading involves two very different questions:

--How much credit is at stake in this performance?

--How many levels of quality shall I use on my evaluation scale?

Thus the important points of analysis here are these. We can get what we need for important or high stakes assignments by raising the stakes and just using three or at most four levels--or making pass harder to get. Most of our difficulties with grading come from having too many levels, that is, too much verticality:

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--The more levels we use, the more untrustworthy and unfair the results. We know what serious research has shown (along with informal research by students turning in the same paper to multiple teachers): good readers cannot agree in their rankings. Your A paper is liable to become a B in my hands--or vice versa.

--The more levels we use, the more chances students have to resent or even dispute those fine-grained distinctions we struggled so hard to make in the first place. ("That wasn't a B-, that was a B!") Thus the more levels we have, the more adversarial the student/teacher relationship and consequently the more damage to the teaching/learning climate.

--The more levels we use, the more we establish a competitive atmosphere among students and a pecking order culture.

--The more levels we use, the more work for us. It's hard making all those fine distinctions--say between A and A- or B+ and B. If we just use three levels, all we need to do is pick out papers that are notably strong and notably weak.

I'm not saying that if we use only three levels, all difficulties will vanish and that our grades will always be fair and happily accepted by students. Even if we use only two or three levels, some students will feel resentful when they get a lower grade than they expected. But if we sort papers into only three piles, there will be less struggle for us, and fewer grades for students to doubt and quarrel with. Boundary decisions are always the most dubious or untrustworthy. Fewer boundaries means fewer boundary decisions, which in turn means fewer arguable decisions.

"But how can we compute a conventional, eleven-level, final grade for the registrar if our constituent grades are only on three levels?" There is no problem here as long as we have <u>enough</u> constituent grades. If we want a mathematical formula, we need only count points--3 for a Strong, 2 for Satisfactory, and 1 for Weak--to come up with a final grade. If there are a lot of low stakes assignments graded on a two level scale of Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory, we can decide that students with Satisfactory on all their low stakes assignments start off with a foundation of B. Then their final grade is pulled up or down by Strongs or Weaks on their high stakes assignments. Various scoring systems are possible--and I haven't even mentioned other factors that many teachers count in their final grading, such as attendance, participation, and effort.

My first suggestion in this section, then, is to use minimal grades. Not an huge change; simply a bit less of the pure, unarticulated, single-dimensional verticality of conventional grading--a bit <u>less</u> of the main problem in grading. (However, the addition of <u>words</u> such as "Satisfactory" "Unsatisfactory" and "Excellent" will give a slight sense of the horizontal dimension. Words or concepts reduce the sense of pure numerical verticality and make the meanings of grades a little less mystical.)

Yet despite the advantages of minimal grading, I must acknowledge that they carry less information than conventional grades--since conventional grades record more distinctions. Never mind that the additional information in conventional grades is bad information; many students still experience minimal grading as <u>taking something away from them</u>--and something deeply valued.

That is, conventional grading <u>feels</u> more precise than minimal grading at the job of telling students just how well or how badly they did at a task.

Conventional grading sorts students into more groups--groups that are thus more finely differentiated--giving students a sense of seeing themselves as better and worse in relation to wider spread of their peers.

When students (or colleagues) contemplate moving to minimal grading and thus losing this alleged information and precision, they may blinded to the fact that it was never trustworthy. The structure of greater information and precision can be comforting. And even if we could trust the information and precision--even if all the decisions in conventional grading were correct--neither students nor any other readers of the grades would get the benefit of it unless they saw all the grades for the whole class. That is, a student can't feel the "information" or "precision" carried by his B- unless he sees what grade everyone else got. Finally, even though conventional grading may seem to tell students more precisely how well or badly they did, it tells them nothing at all about what it is they did well or badly at.

My purpose in the next section, therefore, is to show that when we take away bad information from students by moving to minimal grading, we can give them better information or meaning in return. We can make minimal grades more meaningful than conventional grades if we can tell students what they are actually weak, satisfactory, or excellent at (and also convince them that our minimal grades tell fewer lies). To do so, we need to work out the criteria for our minimal grades.

(b) To use criteria in grading is to add a helpful horizontal dimension to grading. By spelling out the various featurres of writing that we are looking for when we grade, we are saying that "quality in writing" is not a single, monolithic, one dimensional thing. And of course we are giving more information and meaning to our grades and making them less mysterious.

How do we name criteria? Over the decades, teachers and evaluators have recurringly settled on certain familiar criteria for judging writing. The simplest, crudest criteria are the traditional pair, form and content--which are actually quite useful despite some criticism of them as old fashioned or even theoretically suspect. Just as commonly used in evaluating is a more elaborated set of criteria with elements like these: ideas, organization, syntax/wording, mechanics. Instead of or in addition to those criteria--which are very textual--many teachers like to use criteria that are more rhetorical or process oriented such as, connecting with the subject, connecting to an audience, voice, substantively revised. Teachers often emphasize the intellectual operations that are most central to particular assignments by using criteria like these: detail, analysis, persuasion, research, documentation. The important point is that we get to name the criteria we care about most. Scholars and critics have not been able to agree on what "good writing" really is, so we get to decide what we are actually looking for and admit it openly to our students.

The simplest way to use criteria in grading papers is just to spell them out publicly--to name the features or characteristics of writing that we are looking for when we grade--yet still give just one overall grade to the paper. Thus we might say to students, "In grading this set of papers I will try to count these four criteria equally: . . . ." Or "I will grade most on the strength of your argument, but I'll also take some account of these other three criteria: . . . ." If our criteria are at all complicated, we can explain and describe them in a handout. We need this simple quick use of

criteria especially if we are teaching a large class that doesn't center on writing and we have little or no help in grading, or if we want to assign a multitude of graded papers. Even if we give nothing but a single minimal grade, we can make that grade carry much more information and meaning if we spell out our criteria in public.

And we will tend to grade more fairly if we spell out our criteria. The process of figuring them out and announcing them publically renders us less likely to be unduly swayed if one particular feature of the writing is terribly weak or strong. For example, research has shown that teachers often get annoyed by papers that are full of grammar and spelling mistakes and non-standard dialect, and consequently overlook virtues in content or reasoning in such papers.

However, if we want to make the fullest use criteria, we can give a grade on each one. We can tell each student how well we think he or she did on each of the features of writing we are looking for. In doing this we are making <u>multiple</u> vertical judgments of quality.

It might seem like too much work to give these multiple grades, but the principle of minimal grading comes to our rescue here. For just as it isn't so hard to read through a set of papers and merely pick out ones that are <u>notably weak</u> or <u>notably strong</u>, so it isn't much harder merely to notice if an essay seems notably weak or notably strong on the criteria we have named as important. I go so far as to make it explicit to students that Satisfactory is the "default" grade and so I will make a notation <u>only</u> if I find something notably strong or weak. If we use criteria in this more complete fashion, we have a kind of grid, and our "grade" on a paper might look something like this:

WEAK	SATISF	STRONG	
		✓	Genuine revision, substantive changes, not just editing
	✓		Ideas, insights, thinking
✓			Organization, structure, guiding the reader
			Language, sentences, wording
✓			Mechanics: spelling, grammar, punctuation, proofreading
			Overall

Above is what a grid might look like when I photocopy a set of blank ones and make check marks and perhaps comments by hand. But often I use a grid when I write comments on my computer. I put the grid on a little file that I can re-use for each student, and this permits me to write in little comments about a criterion--or a comment at the end about the whole paper. With the computer, my grid response might look more like the following:

GENUINE REVISION, SUBSTANTIVE CHANGES, NOT JUST EDITING:
IDEAS, INSIGHTS, THINKING: *Strong. I liked the way you complicated things by exploring points that conflict with your main point.*
ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE, GUIDING THE READER: *Weak. I kept feeling con fused about where you were going--though also sensing that my confusion came from your process of complicating your thinking. This confusion would be GOOD if it weren't a final draft.*
LANGUAGE, SENTENCES, WORDING:
MECHANICS: SPELLING, GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, PROOFREADING: *Weak. Because*

10

of all the mistakes, this paper doesn't fulfill the contract and is not acceptable. I'll call it acceptable this first time IF you give me a fully cleaned up version by next class.

OVERALL: *Unsatisfactory for now.**

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*By the way, I am embarrassed that the visual form of the grid works against my metaphor of the "vertical and horizontal" dimensions of grading. That is, even though metaphorically, judgments of quality clearly move vertically from "low" to "high," it's much easier graphically to represent quality as moving horizontally from left to right--so that we can spell out the criteria more fully in words.

When we use criteria in this fuller way by making multiple judgments, we finally make our grades carry the most explicit meaning--rather than letting them remain mysterious or magical. And we finally give students some valuable feedback on the strengths and weaknesses in their writing--feedback that they don't get from conventional grades. Indeed sometimes these check-marks on a grid (perhaps with a few short comments) are clearer and more useful to students than the longer comments we write in our late-at-night, unrevised prose.

Grids are particularly useful for responding to a revised final version when we have already put our main responding time and energy into giving feedback and suggestions to an earlier draft. After all, extended commenting makes more sense at the draft stage: we can say, "Here's what you need to work on to make it better" instead of just giving the autopsy, "Here's why it didn't work." Then when we come to the final draft, a "verdict" kind of comment is more appropriate--and so we can just read through the paper and check off criteria on the grid and give no comments.

In this final section, then, I've suggested two procedures we can use in grading papers while still working within a conventional grading system: minimal grades as a way to diminish the verticality; articulated criteria as a way to add the horizontal dimension.

But minimal grading and criteria are not just useful within a conventional grading system. They could vastly improve institutional grading itself. At present, a transcript consists of a myriad of single letter grades that no reader can trust since faculty members have different standards. When a student gets a B, it can mean anything from good honors work (most college catalogues call B an "honors grade") to disappointing work. Nor can readers translate those grades into meaningful or useful information. Even when a student gets an A, we don't have any idea what skills or kinds of writing the student is good at and not so good at.

Transcripts would be much more useful if they represented a different deployment of energy and ambition. On the one hand we should be less ambitious and stop pretending that students can be reliably sorted into eleven vertical levels of quality--or that the sortings would mean the same thing in different teachers' hands. Transcripts would be more honest, accurate, and trustworthy if they settled for recording only three levels, say, Honors, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory (or at most four: Honors, Strong Work, Fair Work, Unsatisfactory Work).

But on the other hand, we can afford to be far more ambitious where it

counts and give grades on criteria for each course. Thus at the end of a course we would provide the registar and the transcript with a small grid of grades for each student. We would give a grade for the student's overall performance--using three or at most four levels. But we would also list the three to six criteria that we think are most important, and for each we would tick off whether we thought this student's work was satisfactory or notably weak or notably strong.

It would help us in our teaching if we could say to students at the start of the course what criteria we would be ranking them on for final transcript grade. But faculty members would not all be forced to use the same criteria. There could be a large list of criteria to choose from. (Textual criteria like clarity, organization; process criteria like generating lots of ideas, revising, working collaboratively; rhetorical criteria like awareness of audience and voice; genre-related criteria like informal personal writing; analysis, argument.) Teachers could even create their own criteria. In fact teachers wouldn't even be obliged to use the same criteria for every student in a course. After all one might want to bring in certain criteria only occasionally in order to note certain students as particularly creative or diligent--or unable to meet deadlines--yet not want to speak about these criteria for all students.

This sounds complicated, but given computers, this system would not be hard to manage--both for giving course grades and in producing a transcript. (Elementary school report cards have long used this approach; and many high school teachers have recently been given a list of fifty or more criteria they can add to the grades they give on report cards.) And readers of the transcript would finally get useful information about substance and be spared the untrustworthy and harmful alleged information about levels of quality.

Final comment

In this paper I am trying to get outside the either/or debates around grading. We can look for better ways to grade and not grade. We can make small pragmatic improvements and push for large utopian change. The human impulse to judge or evaluate is inevitable and useful, but we also need to find ways to step entirely outside of that impulse.

Many of the debates in our discipline concern comparable false choices: between individualism and community; between an agenda that addresses a student's growth as a writer and one that addresses social change. When we look at things through a lens of one-dimensional theory, we tend to get trapped into either/or thinking--false choices. Points of contradiction are often the best sources of new thinking.

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